

Benjamin, Work notes

written 1935/36

1932-37 leftists leave Germany

applied versions: John Berger, Ways of Seeing; Susan Sontag, On Photography

Context

against the rise of Fascism, in an age of mass media

the development of mass communications and culture

telephone,

phonograph

radio

film

Quote from Valéry

the *physical* component of art has changed

base/infrastructure (substructure/superstructure)

Outmoded concepts

creativity

genius

eternal value (universal, ahistorical)

ethnocentric

mystery

I. Greeks

foundry, metal into molds

stamping--coins, plates, etc. (some ceramics)

woodcut print (medieval)

souvenir, religious

moveable type printing (and inexpensive paper)

19C

lithography (illustrated newspaper)

photography (1840-)

ASIDE: counterfeit, art fakes become an issue

II. "aura"--authenticity of the work of art

process reproduction--a "better" likeness

copies can go more places

the technique of reproduction detaches the object from the tradition

a plurality of copies

III. Change in sense perception

nature (biology)

culture (history)

desire to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly

a desire to possess? to make familiar?

example, lifestyles of the rich and famous

social function removed

parvenus, celebrities

example, animal/nature documentary

space exploration

making the 'distant' familiar (but obscuring its social function)

IV. traditional art has a basis in ritual function

(even a secular humanism of "beauty")

with the development of photography, art responds with art for art's sake

the work of art is freed from dependence on ritual

it begins to be based in politics

V. move from cult value (use in ritual) to exhibition value (public and diverse display)

the symphony replaces the religious Mass

two aspects of past art--today, exhibition

we may recognize its art only later or secondarily

first--communication on information, data, event

later--in its own right

example: Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima (from photo to monumental statue in Washington DC)

VI. cult value in photography--the portrait

exhibition value--Atget as documentation value (raw factuality? evidence)

the picture magazines--the necessity of the caption directing meaning

VII. divorcing art from cult

result: "the autonomy of art" disappears

film--attempt to classify it as an art leads to attempt to give it cult value

VII. acting

stage

film--selects parts of a performance

IX. Presence of the camera

play to camera, not to audience

a different relation

X. Against the loss of "aura"

build up of star/celebrity as a phenomenon

film fits within the commodity system

is film revolutionary? only in critique of traditional arts

but it can promote social criticism

documentary: everyone can become a star

reality TV

COPS producer

call in radio shows, etc.

the creation of a mass audience

therefore a different relation of author and audience

many people can become writers, makers, “senders”

relation of literacy and the means of dissemination

people have the legitimate right to ask to be reproduced (to enter into the means of communication)

the leaflet, the poster, bulletin

image material

XI. film--the invisibility of the mechanism (the studio, etc.)

surgeon/magician

camera operator/painter

intruder into reality, but distanced, like a surgeon

XII. Mechanical reproduction changes the masses attitude

vs. Picasso

pro Chaplin

(but today? vs. Picasso? (the Cubists have won)

“progressive reaction”

direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert

(the conventional is enjoyed without criticism)

is this true? exaggeration?

today surrealism can be used in some forms/sites

some do object to the grotesque, horror

XIII. film has changed everyday perception

close up=detail

science + art (slow motion, etc.)

XIV. Dada

works which deny a stance by the viewer of calm contemplation--immersion in the experience

contemplation--became an escape from the social world

Dada countered with distraction as a form of social behavior

distinguish boredom/distraction

extreme form: outrage the public

examples: religious themed work (Gibson's PASSION; Scorsese, Godard, Pasolini, etc.)

XV. Mass audience

film--contemplation--absorption by the work (the work dominates)

TV--distraction--the mass absorbs the work (audience dominates)

the public is absent-minded

analogy of architecture

Brecht--boxing, circus, cabaret

Epilogue

fascism

introduces aesthetics into politics in an attempt to give the masses of people something (self-expression) without changing property relations

ritualization, importance of the Fuhrer cult, etc.

Reagan, movie star as president

Arnold, movie star as governor

examples

Iron Eagle (the film)

attack on Libya--the media event

first Gulf War

TOP GUN on the eve of the US attack

Marinetti--“war is beautiful”

communism responds y politicizing art (Brecht, Heartfield)